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AUTHOR Gibson, Claude L.
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ABSTRACT

Discussion of the contribution of a particular course toward developing teacher competency raises the question: "Just what does one need to know to teach composition?" If a person were to take only one course, it would likely be "Composition for Teachers." In theory lie answers, so a suitable syllabus would include Beth Neman's "Teaching Students to Write," James Kinneavy's "A Theory of Discourse," and Claude Faulkner's "Writing Good Sentences," among others. Students would also be required to write four essays to test their knowledge and foster flexibility. A composition course for teachers can instill a false sense of security because students may exit thinking that they join a world where reason prevails and colleagues share like values. The greatest threat to developing teacher competency is that a number of teachers have ignored most developments in theory and practice. To attain and maintain competency as teachers, there must be an on-going return to the theory and scholarship of the discipline, a use of it to inform their own practice as writers and teachers, and an experiencing of excitement from engagement on the issues. The students will then exit the composition-for-teachers course ready not just to teach but to profess. (DF)

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Claude L. Gibson

G6: Developing Teacher Competency

CCCC Convention

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Not Just to Teach but to Profess

My talk today discusses the contribution of a particular course to developing teacher competency. I am thinking of a graduate class often entitled "Seminar in the Teaching of Composition," "Approaches to Composition," "Applied Rhetoric," "Composition for Teachers," or something similar--an eclectic course not to be confused with others of more specific focus in linguistics, semantics, rhetoric, and even psychology that many teachers take to earn a degree or specialty in rhetoric and composition.

In her January 1985 review for College English of Richard Graves' Rhetoric and Composition: A Source Book for Teachers, 2nd Edition ("Teaching Writing Teachers," 47, No. 1, 58-65), Anne Ruggles Gere states that the appearance of Graves' book implies the success of the first edition--that is, the existence of an audience, probably courses for composition teachers. The existence of that audience is of some significance. Ms. Gere relates that as late as the 1950s, Harold Allen could find among forty-seven composition programs visited only five graduate courses in composition. The expansion of higher education, the growth in writing based courses at the college level, the often heavy reliance on graduate assistants to teach these courses, and the demand for accountability among students and teachers have together made the composition for teachers course an important component of many graduate programs today. And it has raised a prickly question which the profession is still trying to answer:

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Just what does one need to know to teach composition?

The attempt to answer that question elicits all kinds of chimerical responses because of the motley crew passing through such courses--teaching assistants, secondary English teachers, specialists in teaching English as a second language, those concerned with serving the disadvantaged or the gifted, an occasional creative writer, and perhaps faculty seeking retraining. A dramatic growth in research and scholarship and a proliferation in rhetoric and composition offerings over the last two decades mean, fortunately, one course alone does not have to provide the whole answer. Yet there is something to keep in mind. If a person were to take only one course, it very likely would be "Composition for Teachers." To her review, Ms. Gere appends forty-seven titles she deems essential to introducing students to the field.

Alan C. Purves, in a November 1984 piece for College English ("NCTE: The House of Intellect or Spencer Gifts," 46, No. 7, 693-96), expressed his concern that NCTE has fallen into the trap of divorcing practice from theory, of coming to resemble "a crafts organization," and of trying "to reach teachers as crafts persons" (695). He sees the need "to reassert . . . [the] Council as a professional society, providing a theoretical analysis of English and language education and using that analysis to modify and inform practice as well as using practice to test theory" (696). Purves's uneasiness has a direct bearing on the focus of this session (developing teacher competency); on that question raised earlier (Just what does one need to know to teach composition?); and, of course, on that one-course overview which has come into prominence on the campus of so many colleges and universities ("Composition for Teachers").

For five years I was the teacher of such a course at Texas A&M University.

The course proved a continual tug-of-war, with the students--especially those who had been in the classroom as teachers themselves and had encountered the myriad challenges which seem to require explicit strategies, guidelines, and solutions--pulling toward the practical, the answer; and with me, bolstered by conviction confirmed by twenty years of studying and teaching composition, pulling equally as hard toward theory, something I felt would benefit them most in the long run. I share with Purves a bias. For it is in theory that lie, if not the answer, answers. For it is theory that evokes the most imaginative, creative response from the teacher who would be competent.

I put together a syllabus which presented what I felt the uninitiated should know. What follows will give you some idea. Beth Neman's Teaching Students to Write (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1981) provided a satisfactory survey of current theory, procedure, and methods for every step in the writing process, with a good focus on expository and persuasive writing taught from a thesis-centered approach and with a strong emphasis on prewriting and revising. To that I added material from James Kinneavy on the communications triangle and the aims of discourse (A Theory of Discourse. NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971); taught a structural approach for writing and analyzing sentences (Claude Faulkner's Writing Good Sentences. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981; and Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg's The Writer's Options. NY: Harper & Row, 1979); presented an intensive investigation of meaning relationships to address matters of coherence and style (Alexander Jones and Claude Faulkner's Writing Good Prose. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977); and broached the subject of usage through the reading of College Composition and Communication's still controversial special issue Students' Right to Their Own Language (25, No. 3 [Fall 1974], 1-32), fleshed out by Edward Finegan's Attitudes toward English Usage: The History of a War of Words (NY: Teachers College Press, 1980).

Additional assignments were made to introduce students to a number of our leading journals. It was hoped that the journals would give students a proper sense of what it means to work within the discipline and show them where the opportunity for continuing genuine intellectual engagement in composition study is.

While the composition for teachers course can inform and even invigorate and inspire its enrollees, it can also instill a false sense of security. After all, everyone in the class is associating with others of similar motivation to develop their understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the field as well as to master the pedagogy. If one is not careful, one can allow them to exit thinking they join a world where reason prevails and the teaching ranks are filled with colleagues sharing like commitments and values.

So there are some additional things the students should know: for example, that the majority of textbooks for composition rather feebly translate theory into application; that instructors can be bound by program directors, course objectives, assignments, and syllabi which do not reflect their own ideas of how the teaching of writing should be approached; and that a surprising number of our profession have ignored most, if not all, developments in theory and practice. I see this last as the greatest threat to developing teacher competency because it encourages indifference.

Edward White and Linda Folin report in their "Research on Composition Programs: Faculty Attitudes and Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing" (WPA: Writing Program Administration, 8, Nos. 1-2 [Fall-Winter 1984], 37-45) there is a significant portion of the English faculty among the nineteen campuses of the California State University system--and probably elsewhere--who evidence a strong anti-composition bent. Yes, Virginia, faculty exist "who feel that

tenured and tenure-track faculty do not need review or coordination of their instruction," "who avoid faculty development and [if possible] undergraduate writing courses," and who "also oppose remedial writing at the college level, see 'writing as process' as one more passing fad, and (as one might expect) do not feel that their students [or anyone's students, for that matter] improve very much as a result of a single writing course" (40). Since about seventy percent of the more than four hundred faculty studied are age forty-nine or younger (38), what White and Polin call the "ba humbug" group is going to be with us certainly for decades to come.

To test knowledge, to encourage practice of a kind my students will require of their own students, and to foster flexibility, I required four essays. For the first, I took a cue from Beth Neman (Teaching Students to Write, 115) and presented the class with a writing course syllabus specifying six papers--description, definition, comparison and contrast, classification, cause and effect, and persuasion. It was assumed the teacher would see a number of problems in such a pattern and in the mixing of aims and modes. I asked for an essay explaining how they could teach what they considered essential and yet accommodate the prescribed syllabus. For the second, they were to reflect on the grammar controversy--that is, read those studies questioning the teaching of grammar for the improvement of writing, for the elimination of errors, or for the development of style as well as Martha Kolln's "Closing the Books on Alchemy" (College Composition and Communication, 32 [May 1981], 139-151), which questions the questioners; and write a paper on the role of grammar, if any, in a composition program. For the third, I drew on their reading of Students' Right to Their Own Language and Attitudes toward English Usage. They were asked to examine three college-level dictionaries and to write a persuasive essay

recommending the one that best supported their teaching goals and attitudes toward the language. And for the fourth, I had the class read Wayne Booth's "A Report on the Failure of Idecom" (College English, 43, No. 2 [February 1981], 111-121), which lambastes the products of most contemporary writing (They do not pass the fan test!) and write a response, something that required an assessment of the process v. product dispute.

Because of the stickiness of the issues, the rather broad possibilities for response, and the diversity in class makeup, what emerged from the class was not necessarily the answer but an aggregate of answers, heatedly and healthily exchanged on assignment due dates. What also emerged I hope was a sense of what it takes to attain and maintain competency as teachers--an on-going return to the theory and scholarship of the discipline, a use of it to inform their own practice as writers and teachers, and an experiencing of the excitement that comes only from engagement on the issues. With that, they exit the composition for teachers course ready not just to teach but to profess.